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ABSTRACT

All students enrolled in the entry level foundations course in the College of Education of Kutztown University (Pennsylvania) participate in home groups, a cooperative learning strategy. Each student is assigned to a five- or six-person home group on the first day of class. Although group placements are made on the basis of class lists, every attempt is made to diversify groups by gender, age, major, and race. Each week the students are involved in an in-class learning activity with their home group. The home group operates formally and informally during the 14-week course. Some activities are part of a planned objective and some evolve from student need. Formal activities include: each member teaching a mini lesson to members of the group; each member providing written feedback to the student teacher; group study before tests; electing, for some tests, a group grade; and serving as an expert when "jigsaw" learning occurs. Less formal activities have included: preparing a special food treat for a reluctant student as a reward for class attendance; organizing notes for a hospitalized group member; and offering extra help to a student athlete during the sport season. The home groups build bonds among students from different backgrounds, teach them collaborative skills, and teach students to care about each other as members of the teaching profession. (The paper includes three students' written comments on home groups.) (JLS)

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Home Groups

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Home Groups

Traditionally, Kutztown University has served first generation, white rural and suburban students from eastern Pennsylvania. Kutztown was founded as a normal school and has a rich legacy of preparing classroom teachers. In fulfilling the mission of a teacher preparation program, the university has worked to attract a more diverse student population. Students at Kutztown need help in working with students who represent diverse cultures. Students also need support because a great percent of our students are first generation college students.

One strategy that has been successfully utilized in the foundations course which is an entry level course for all students enrolled in the College of Education is the home group. Home groups are a cooperative learning strategy. In the course, *Perspectives on American Education*, each student is assigned to a five or six member home group on the first day of class. The students are divided into groups by major, gender, age, race. While the instructor has not met the students, decisions about group placement are made on the basis of the class list. Every attempt is made to diversify each group as much as possible. On the first day of class, students are encouraged to share information about one another, exchange addresses and phone numbers, and work collaboratively on a beginning assignment. By establishing groups immediately and assigning an activity, the students begin to listen to one another and establish collaborative relationships with persons in their profession. The students are told that they are responsible individually for the course material, but they are expected to help one another develop as teachers and learners.

Weekly, the students are involved in a learning activity with their home group. During some weeks the activity may be a brief ten minute review meeting, during other weeks the entire period may be spent working on an instructional activity with the home group members. Student also work with other class members in "expert" groups, but the responsibility for learning rests with the home group. The home group depends on information which the "expert" has acquired from interacting with other experts. For example. when we discuss the needs of multicultural learners, the students are divided into expert groups. Each group of experts meet to discuss their knowledge about a particular minority learner. The experts then returned to their home group with information about their particular learner. If students miss class they are expected to get caught up by talking to a member of the home group. If a student is called on in class and does not have an answer, he or she is always told to call on a home group member. When hand outs are distributed, home group member are reminded to make sure that everyone in the home group has one or to take materials for absent members. Much attention is drawn to the home group relationship in the early days of the class in an attempt to help the student become more comfortable with the group concept .

The home group operates both formally and informally during the fourteen week course. Some of the activities have been part of a planned objective, some of the activities have evolved from student need. Some of the activities are unique to a particular group, while other activities are universal in acceptance.

Some of the formal activities of the group are:

1. Each member teaches a mini lesson to members of the group

2. Each member provides written feedback to the student teacher

3. Before each test, the home groups are given the opportunity to spend time preparing for the test together. After the test, the home group meets again to discuss their satisfaction with their performance and to examine the correct answers.

4. For 2 of the 4 multiple choice tests, student have the option of using the groups average score rather than their individual score. This method of evaluation has encouraged them to help one another but does not penalize the student who scores most highly on the test.

5. Each student serves as an expert when jigsaw learning occurs.

Some of the less formal activities of the group are:

1. One group took it upon themselves to see that a reluctant student came to class. They made a deal to bring him breakfast if he came to the 8:00 class. Marcus would arrive to find a rice krispie treat or some other sweet on his desk. He became a regular in class and still gets together with the group that pulled him in.

2. When a home group member became hospitalized, the group members decided to take turns calling to keep her informed, organized notes, and helped her catch up when she came back to class 3 weeks later.

3. One student, a student athlete, had to miss class fairly often in the early spring. His group members had his materials ready for him, they "let him slide" during his season, and made him make it up to them when this season ended. He became group test leader.

4. One group visited a student who was hospitalized during the term. They had the entire class sign a card for her and helped her catch up with material when she returned to class.

5. One group took turns calling one student until they trusted him to show up for class every day.

6. Groups have met to support another group member who had a part in a school theater production or was an athlete by attending the event together.

My experience has been that these students learn to care about one another. They begin to associate with students who they may not otherwise associate with. Students have come to me a year after I have had them in class to tell me their concerns about a particular student who was a member of their home group. I admit I cannot often remember the students why are concerned nor am I very sure who they are talking about, but realize that the bond formed in this class has made an impression on them.

At the end of the course the students are asked to discuss a critical event that occurred during the term and helped them to reflect on teaching and learning. I have learned not to be surprised by how many of the students talk about their home group experience. I have included three students comments. These students are among the many who chose to discuss the home groups. Other students chose a field experience, a class activity, a writing assignment or a particular topic in the text as their critical event. I chose these three responses because they were representative of what the students had to say about home groups.

"The best part of this class was not the class but my group. I had no idea that a group could have so powerful an influence on me. I came to class sometimes because I did not want to let them down. I worked on my teaching assignment because I knew that I was responsible for what they learned. We were really very different from one another. In fact, there were students who I would not even have talked to. I had never been friends with a black person, and when I first heard Jazz say that his name was Jazz, I was really put off. I found him to be interested and interesting and he has become a good friend (good enough to tell me when I am being "bogus"). Chad was cool so I was glad he was in my group but he just became one of us, trying to learn to teach. The six of us are friends. I hope I can learn to be friends with the people that I teach with, but I know that when I get my first teaching job, I will tell Jazz, Chad, Robin, Marie and Kristin." Heather

Heather taught me some important truths about teaching and learning. One can talk about interdependence, but how is interdependence taught? Heather learned interdependence because she came to value other students' opinions and insights. Heather had attended a rural school and her only experiences with diverse persons occurred through the media. She became friends with a person from a diverse culture and his diversity became less important than his person. She came to value a friend. Heather learned to collaborate. In this information age, teacher must be able to

collaborate. Studies by the federally funded Center for Research on the Context of secondary School Teaching, completed last year, revealed that teachers' participation in a "professional community" had a powerful effect on how successfully they were able to adapt their instructional strategies to meet their student's needs.In conducting their interview, the researchers found that teachers who had made the most successful changes about their practice and had more positive views about their students' capabilities turned out to have one thing in common: belonging to an active professional community that encouraged and enabled them to transform their teaching (Bradley, 1996).

"I have learned as much from my home group as I have from this class. What I have learned from the home group is to give everyone a chance and to be more patient. I have learned to slow down and to relax, to help people when they need help, and to be willing to ask for help when help is needed. I also have learned from just observing my home group members that all people learn in different paces than everyone else. it is really important to give people a chance no matter how long it takes them to get things done." Matt

Teacher can be told that learners are different, but to respect a person's differences must be experienced. Insight into what student believe can be gained from examining a survey conducted by Learning magazine. Learners in K-12 classrooms value teachers who have learned Matt's lesson. When eighth graders we were asked to give tips to teachers, learners asked teachers to be patient and not to give up on students. I believe that Matt has learned this; I believe that Matt has learned to respect differences in how children and adults learn. This will help Matt to become a better teacher.

The critical event which has helped me think about the teaching profession has been the use of home groups. As a future teacher, I now realize the importance of having people "on your side' in dealing with various projects. We as a home group were able to relate to all of the assignments we had to do, thus giving us the chance to encourage and support one another. The group also helped very much in knowing universal problems included in the area of teaching (nervousness, preparation). We could ask each other feelings and advice. I hope to establish some sort of "home group" when I become a teacher to reap the benefits of the group. Doug

Doug has found that when his learning is supported, he is better able to support the learning of his students. As a beginning teaching candidate, he has begun to sort out what might work and what might not work in his classroom. I believe that it is the job of teacher educator's to help that sorting out process. Doug has learned an instructional strategy which he hopes to employ in the classroom.

In preparing future teachers, it is certainly critical that both content knowledge and pedagogical skills are stressed.Teaching content i important and it is measurable. I can develop the objectives of a course and measure student understand of those objectives. It has been my experience, however, that the really good teachers have a passion about their profession and a compassion for their learners that goes beyond content. How can teacher preparation programs teach this passion and compassion? I believe that the home group strategy helps learners to care about one another, helps them to care about persons who are different than they are, helps them to share in being their "brother or sister's keeper." The students in this foundation course have demonstrated a varieties of abilities to learn the material of the course. The students in this course have demonstrated a varieties of abilities to care about other student. Both of these abilities will help them succeed as teachers.

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